

A1  
a central server receiving via a network a request to ship an item from an origination to a final destination;

the central server searching a database for a most inexpensive routing, wherein the most inexpensive routing includes using two or more different shipping companies and one or more intermediate destinations;

the central server generating a data file comprising at least the following:

intermediate destination information identifying the one or more intermediate destinations, and

final destination information identifying the final destination;

the central server transferring the data file over a network; and

storing the data file in a memory device that accompanies the item.

A2  
Sub B1  
B7  
4. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising forwarding copies of at least a portion of the data file via the network to one or more parties involved in the shipping, wherein the parties include at least an originator of the request to ship the item, a recipient of the item at the final destination, and two or more shipping companies.

A3  
Sub B1  
B7  
7. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising shipping the item using the least expensive routing.

8. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:  
packing the item in a container;  
inserting the container in a first carrier with a first set of additional containers bound for a first of the one or more intermediate destinations; and  
shipping the first carrier to the first intermediate destination.

A4  
Sub B1  
B7  
10. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further comprises contact information for one or more shipping companies that will handle the item.

11. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising storing the data file on a server connected to the network, wherein the server provides access to the data file via the network.

12. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further comprises item weight information.

13. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further comprises item handling information.

14. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further comprises item content information.

15. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further comprises payment information.

16. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further includes one or more digital images of the item before, during, or after shipping.

17. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the data file further includes one or more digital images of the item showing the physical condition of the item upon receipt at one or more intermediate destinations.

18. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device further comprises a temperature sensor, wherein the temperature sensor is configured to periodically measure and store temperature readings in the data file.

19. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device further comprises a humidity sensor, wherein the physical humidity sensor is configured to periodically measure and store humidity readings in the data file.

20. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device further comprises an environmental sensor, wherein the environmental sensor is configured to periodically measure and store in the data file information about one or more environmental factors that the item experiences during shipment.

21. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device further comprises a vibration sensor, wherein the vibration sensor is configured to record any vibrations greater than a preprogrammed threshold in the data file.

22. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device is coupled to a wire-less communications device.

23. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:  
detecting one or more obstacles to on-time delivery of the item, searching the database for a new least expensive routing that avoids the obstacles; and  
updating the data file to reflect the new least expensive routing.

A5  
Sub  
B1  
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28. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising updating the data file on the central server to reflect arrival of the item at one or more of the intermediate destinations.

A6  
Sub  
B1  
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41. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device is a flash memory device.

42. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the memory device is a CD-RW.

A7  
Sub  
B1  
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44. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, wherein the database include price information and delivery time information.

45. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising:

A7  
detecting one or more obstacles to on-time delivery of the item, soliciting new quotations for shipping the item from one of the intermediate locations to the final destination by transmitting a supplemental request for quotation via the network; receiving additional responses to the supplemental request for quotation via the network; selecting an alternate shipping route for the item based on the additional responses; and confirming the selected alternate shipping route via the network.

A8  
49. (Amended) The method as recited in claim 1, further comprising updating the data file on the central server to reflect the item's arrival at the final destination.

Sub B1  
50. (Amended) A computer program embodied on a computer-readable medium, wherein the computer program is configured to:  
receive a shipping request via a network for an item to be shipped from an origination to a final destination;  
search a database of shipping information;  
select a shipping route for the item based on the shipping information included in the database, wherein the shipping route comprises one or more intermediate destinations and uses two or more different shipping companies;  
confirm the selected shipping route via the network;  
generate a data file comprising at least the following:  
a unique item identifier,  
origination information,  
intermediate destination information, and  
final destination information;  
transfer the data file via the network; and  
store the data file in a memory device that accompanies the item, wherein the memory device is configured to allow the data file to be updated at one or more of the intermediate destinations.

A8  
51. (Amended) The computer program of claim 50, wherein the computer program is further configured to maintain and update the database by sending requests for quotes using the network.

A9  
Sub B7  
53. (Added) A system comprising:

a database of shipping information;

a central server coupled to the database and configured to select a shipping route for an item in response to querying the database, wherein the central server is configured to generate a data file including information identifying an origination, destination, and intermediate destination comprised in the shipping route; and

a memory device configured to be coupled to the item and configured to receive and store a copy of the data file generated by the central server.

54. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to update the database in response to receiving one or more responses to a request for quote from one or more shipping companies.

55. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to confirm the shipping route prior to providing the data file to the memory device.

56. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to receive confirmation of arrival of the item at the intermediate destination and to responsively update the data file to indicate that the item has arrived at the intermediate destination.

57. (Added) The system of claim 56, wherein the central server is configured to send an email indicating arrival of the item at the intermediate destination to a party involved in shipping the item in response to receiving the confirmation.

58. (Added) The system of claim 56, wherein the central server is configured to search the database for a less expensive shipping route from the intermediate destination to the final destination in response to the item arriving at the intermediate destination.

59. (Added) The system of claim 53, further comprising a processing apparatus located at the intermediate destination, wherein the processing apparatus is configured to update the data file stored on the memory device in response to the item arriving the intermediate destination.

60. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to select a least expensive shipping route.

61. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the data file further comprises contact information for one or more shipping companies that will handle the item along the shipping route.

62. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to provide access to the data file via the network.

63. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the data file further comprises item weight information.

64. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the data file further includes one or more digital images of the item before, during, or after shipping.

65. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the data file further includes one or more digital images of the item showing the physical condition of the item upon receipt at the intermediate destination.

Ag 66. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the memory device further comprises an environmental sensor, wherein the environmental sensor is configured to periodically measure and store in the data file information about one or more environmental factors that the item experiences during shipment.

67. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to detect one or more obstacles to on-time delivery of the item, to responsively search the database for a new least expensive routing that avoids the one or more obstacles; and to update the data file to indicate the new least expensive routing.

68. (Added) The system of claim 67, wherein the central server is configured to request new quotations for shipping the item from an intermediate destination to the final destination in response to detecting the one or more obstacles and to responsively receive one or more responses to the request via the network;

wherein the central server is configured to update the database to reflect the responses to the request.

69. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the central server is configured to update the data file to reflect arrival of the item at the final destination.

70. (Added) The system of claim 53, wherein the item is included in a group of items, and wherein the central server is configured to select different shipping routes on which to ship different subsets of the group of items.

71. (Added) A method for shipping goods, wherein the method comprises:  
receiving a request to ship an item from an origination to a final destination;

searching a database for a most inexpensive routing, wherein the most inexpensive routing includes using two or more different shipping companies and one or more intermediate destinations;

generating a data file comprising at least the following:

intermediate destination information identifying the one or more intermediate destinations,

one or more digital images of the item before, during, or after shipping, and

final destination information identifying the final destination; and

storing the data file in a memory device that accompanies the item.

72. (Added) A method for shipping goods, wherein the method comprises: receiving a request to ship an item from an origination to a final destination; searching a database for a most inexpensive routing, wherein the most inexpensive routing includes using two or more different shipping companies and one or more intermediate destinations;

generating a data file comprising at least the following:

intermediate destination information identifying the one or more intermediate destinations,

one or more digital images of the item showing the physical condition of the item upon receipt at one or more intermediate destinations, and

final destination information identifying the final destination; and

storing the data file in a memory device that accompanies the item.

73. (Added) The method of claim 45, further comprising the central server updating the database in response to said receiving the additional responses.

74. (Added) The method of claim 1, wherein the item is included in a group of items to be shipped from the origination to the final destination, the method further comprising the central server selecting one shipping route on which to ship a subset of the group of items and another shipping route on which to ship a remainder of the group of items.